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When "Upperworld" and "Underworld" Meet: Class and Crime in *The Mysteries of London* (1844-46)

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Introduction

George William MacArthur Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London*, serialised between 1844 and 1848, was the biggest-selling novel of the Victorian era. In recent years Reynolds' life and work have received renewed critical attention from literary scholars, who have explored, as Stephen Carver does, Reynolds' representation of the underworld.[1] The term 'underworld' is one that is often used by scholars, but usually without a full consideration of its meaning. For example, while many scholars speak of an underworld of organised crime, rarely do researchers account for the fact that an 'upperworld' must exist also, and that the criminal members of both worlds, or classes, collude together in order to cause harm to 'the industrious classes'. Given that Reynolds sees society as being divided into three distinct classes: the aristocracy, the industrious classes, and the criminal classes, Reynolds' depiction of organised crime challenged emerging Victorian stereotypes of a 'criminal class'. Crime in *The Mysteries of London* is not merely a story of 'the wrongs and crimes of the poor'; it is also a story of the wrongs and crimes of those in the 'upperworld', which of course suited Reynolds' radical sentiments.

Reynolds' Conception of Society

As stated above, Reynolds does not hold to the typical Victorian conception of society as being divided into upper class, middle class(es), and working classes. As we can see, there are several gradations in society: at the top, there is the monarchy and the aristocracy, an institution and a class of people for which Reynolds certainly had no high degree of admiration, and often complained about 'the sickening specimens of grovelling and self-abasement' some people displayed towards the monarchy.[2] A flavour of his attitude towards the aristocracy is evident in his

[1] Stephen J. Carver, 'The Wrongs and Crimes of the Poor: The Urban Underworld of The Mysteries of London in Context' in *G.W.M. Reynolds and Nineteenth-Century British Society: Politics, Fiction and the Press* ed. by Anne Humpherys & Louis James (London: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 185-212
[2] G. W. M. Reynolds cited in Michael Diamond, 'From Journalism and Fiction into Politics' in Anne Humpherys & Louis James (eds.) *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 91-99 (p. 91).

comments about the Duke of Newcastle, who according to Reynolds had ‘a mental capacity amounting almost to the idiotic'.[3] The Duke of Cumberland’s obituary in *Reynolds’ Newspaper* said that he was ‘a monster in human shape, a veritable fiend without a single redeeming quality' whose life amounted to a progression of ‘perjury, adultery, seduction, incest and murder'.[4]

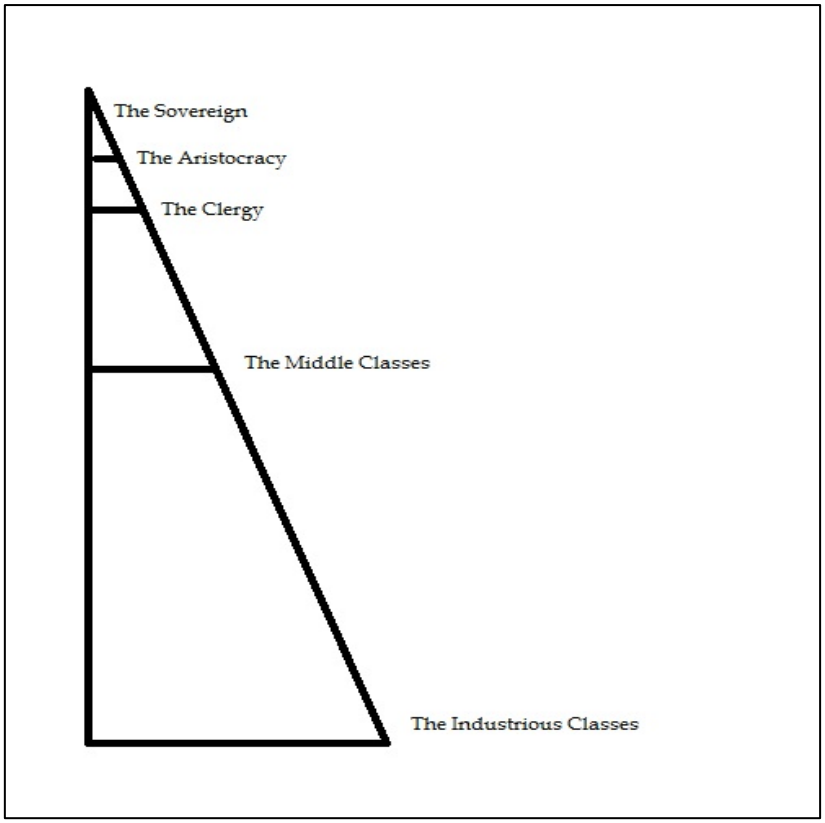

Figure 1: Reynolds' Vision of the Social Divisions of Victorian England. Adapted from *The Mysteries of London*, Vol. 1 (1845), p.179.

Towards the clergy and the Christian religion in general Reynolds likewise had no great regard. One of his earliest written works was a short pamphlet entitled *The Errors of the Christian Religion Exposed* (1832). In this work he writes of how he became a deist, having concluded that ‘we find the Old and New Testament to be false’.[5] Of the nineteenth-century clergy he scathingly asks: ‘who are more addicted to the luxuries and sensualities of life than the ministers of God?’[6]

The people who matter in society, according to Reynolds, are the middle classes and ‘the industrious classes’. The hero of *The Mysteries of London*, Richard Markham, is a member of the middle classes, as was Reynolds himself. In the novel,

[3] *Ibid*.
[4] *Reynolds’ Newspaper* 23 November 1851, p.12.
[5] G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Errors of the Christian Religion Exposed* (London, 1832), p.13.
[6] Reynolds, *The Errors of the Christian Religion Exposed*, p.14.

Reynolds deplores the condition of the working classes, whose problems he attributes to the upper classes:

> The country that contains the greatest wealth of all the territories of the universe, is that which also knows the greatest amount of hideous, revolting, heart-rending misery. In England men and women die of starvation in the streets. In England women murder their children to save them from a lingering death by famine. In England the poor commit crimes to obtain an asylum in a gaol. In England aged females die by their own hands, in order to avoid the workhouse.[7]

The condition of the working poor is set in contrast with the gluttony of the aristocracy who enjoy a life of plenty.[8] But this is not to say that Reynolds views the poor as saints. In his opening chapter, he states that 'crime is abundant in this great city'.[9] And in the ensuing novel, he makes clear that many members of the poorer classes are indeed criminal. Nevertheless, Reynolds was popular with working people, especially Chartists.[10] Despite accusations, both by contemporaries and modern scholars, that his radicalism was mere opportunism, we should note that he certainly had nothing to gain by vehemently expressing his radical and republican sentiments in the press except the opprobrium of contemporaries such as Dickens, who wrote in 1849 that Reynolds' name was 'a name with which no lady's, and no gentleman's, should be associated'.[11] In my opinion, Reynolds perhaps saw himself in the same way that the republican activist in *The Mysteries of London* sees himself; he is a man who is

> Represented as a character who ought to be loathed and shunned by all virtuous and honest people […] And yet, O God! […] I only strive to arouse the grovelling spirit of the industrious millions to a sense of the wrongs under which they labour, and to prove to them that they were not sent into this world to lick the dust beneath the feet of majesty and the aristocracy!"[12]

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[7] G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 1 (London: G. Vickers, 1845), p. 179.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 1, p. 2.
[10] 'Jessica Hindes, 'Revealing Bodies: Knowledge, Power and Mass Market Fictions in G.W.M. Reynolds's Mysteries of London' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2012), p.12n: 'Reynolds was elected to the National Chartist Association's National Executive in 1848 with more votes than any of his fellow committee members; 1,805 to Feargus O'Connor's 1,314'. Further discussions of Reynolds' role in working-class and radical causes are to be found in the following works: Ian Haywood, 'George W. M. Reynolds and "The Trafalgar Square Revolution": Radicalism, the Carnivalesque and Popular Culture in Mid-Victorian England' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7: 1 (2002), pp. 23–59
[11] Charles Dickens, Letter to W.C. Macready, August 30, 1849, cited in Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation: Or the Spectacular, the Shocking and the Scandalous in Victorian Britain* (London: Anthem, 2003), p. 191.
[12] Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 1, p. 70.

It will be noted that he never attacks the middle classes here; he merely speaks of the 'industrious millions' as occupying a place beneath the feet 'of majesty and the aristocracy'. Hence Reynolds' merging of the middle classes and working classes looks back to earlier forms of nineteenth-century radicalism in which both classes formed an alliance to effect parliamentary reform before the 'Great Betrayal' of 1832.[13] Among the many readings of Reynolds' radicalism, it is Gertrude Himmelfarb whose assessment seems most appropriate:

> [Reynolds'] radicalism was of an entirely different order and because his idea of poverty was nihilistic rather than compassionate or heroic […] violence and depravity, licentiousness and criminality, were the only forms of existence, and potentially the only means of redemption, available to the poor.[14]

In essence, Reynolds' depiction of criminality amongst the poorer classes is a literary representation of the fact that society gets the criminals that it deserves.

Collaboration between Upperworld and Underworld

The principal underworld villains in the novel are the Resurrection Man, the Buffer, Dick Flairer and Bill Bolter. They are a tight-knit criminal gang who also have links to a wider network of criminals known as the Forty Thieves.[15] Yet organised crime groups usually carry out their activities with the often tacit approval of those in the upperworld.[16] There is an instance in the novel which neatly illustrates the collusion between people from the two worlds: the Cracksman's undertaking of a highway robbery.

Reynolds' novel is essentially the story of two brothers, the virtuous Richard Markham and his not-so-virtuous brother, Eugene. Although Richard experiences some misfortunes throughout his life, he rises in society through his own virtue, and eventually marries into the family of an Italian nobleman. Eugene, on the other hand, also advances in society through means of corruption, fraud and embezzlement. He eventually becomes the MP for a place called Rottenborough, the naming of which is an allusion to pre-Reform Act constituencies such as Old Sarum. Eugene, who goes under the assumed name of Montague Greenwood, plots to defraud the good Count

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[13] On working-class and middle-class radicalism, the alliances between the two classes, and the Reform Act of 1832 more generally, see the following works: Paul Adelman, *Victorian Radicalism: The Middle-class Experience, 1830-1914* (London: Longman, 1984); Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780-c.1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nancy D. LoPatin, *Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999); Eric J. Evans, *Britain Before the Reform Act: Politics and Society 1815-1832* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

[14] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 451.

[15] G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 2 (London: G. Vickers, 1846), p. 187.

[16] Kelly Hignett, 'Organised Crime in East Central Europe: The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland' *Global Crime* 6: 1 (2004), pp. 70-83 (p. 71).

Alteroni of his fortune. However, he must first acquire a vital document from him. For this, Eugene must employ the services of the Cracksman and his fellows:

> "What's the natur' of the service?" demanded the Cracksman, darting a keen and penetrating glance at Greenwood.
> "A highway robbery," coolly answered [Eugene …]
> "All right!" cried the Cracksman. "Now what's the robbery, and what's the reward?"
> […]
> "I will now explain to you what I want done. Between eleven and twelve o'clock a gentleman will leave London for Richmond. He will be in his own cabriolet, with a tiger, only twelve years old, behind. The cab is light blue – the wheels streaked with white. This is peculiar, and cannot be mistaken. The horse is a tall bay, with silver- mounted harness. This gentleman must be stopped; and everything his pockets contain - everything, mind – must be brought to me. Whatever money there may be about him shall be yours, and I will add fifty guineas to the amount: - but all that you find about his person, save the money, must be handed over to me."[17]

Note the precision with which the robbery is to be carried out: clear and concise instructions are given; crime in the urban, industrial society is cold and calculated; it is organised crime. This is not the romantic highway robbery of the type carried out by William Harrison Ainsworth's Dick Turpin in *Rookwood* (1834). Before the Cracksman commits the crime, he receives an 'advance' of twenty guineas, at which the Cracksman exclaims: 'that's business!'[18] The robbery is carried out, and at Eugene and the Cracksman's second meeting the villains are paid in full for their work. The meeting is concluded with the Cracksman hoping '*that he should have his custom in future*' (italics in original).[19] To the villains of *The Mysteries of London* crime is a business carried out with the sole purpose of financial gain. Surgeons are their customers, or they make themselves available as henchmen-for-hire willing to do the dirty work of those in from supposedly more respectable stations in life as long as the price is right.

The Wrongs and Crimes of the Upperworld

Thus, Reynolds shows that members from the supposedly respectable classes were capable of committing crime independently of their counterparts from criminal classes. Eugene Markham, for instance, along with several MPs, a Lord, and the

[17] Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 1, p. 149.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 1, p. 150.

Sheriff of London are seen conspiring together to establish a fraudulent railway company at a dinner party held by Eugene for his fellow conspirators:

> Algiers, Oran, and Morocco Great Desert Railway.
> "(Provisionally Registered Pursuant to Act.)
> "Capital £1,200,000, in 80,000 shares, of £20 each.
> "Deposit £2 2s. per Share.
> Committee of Direction: The Most Honourable Marquis of Holmesford, G. C. B. Chairman. – George Montague Greenwood, Esq. M.P. Deputy Chairman.[20]

The conspirators require capital, but as Eugene assures those assembled at his dinner party, no such railway scheme exists, and it has only been devised solely for defrauding investors:

> And now, my lord and gentlemen, we perfectly understand each other. Each takes as many shares as he pleases. When they reach a high premium, each may sell as he thinks fit. Then, when we have realized our profits, we will inform the shareholders that insuperable difficulties prevent the carrying out of the project,- that Abd-el-Kadir, for instance, has violated his agreement and declared against the scheme,- that the Committee of Direction will, therefore, retain a sum sufficient to defray the expenses already incurred, and that the remaining capital paid up shall be returned to the shareholders.[21]

This is an example of what might now be termed 'white collar crime' and reflects the 'Railway Mania' of 1846-47, occurring at precisely the time when Reynolds was writing *The Mysteries of London*. The enthusiasm for investing in speculative railway schemes was felt among both the upper and middle classes, and it was the first time that companies relied heavily on investors' capital rather than on government bonds.[22] As George Robb notes, the mania for investing in railway companies was perfect for fraudsters wishing to embezzle funds from their investors: bills for the establishment of new railway companies could be obtained from parliament relatively easily, and investors had little access to sound financial advice and accurate financial data.[23]

The Victorians were under no illusions about the opportunities for fraud and embezzlement that were available to unscrupulous and dishonest businessmen in the nineteenth-century financial world.[24] There are many characters in Victorian

[20] Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 2, p. 95.
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] George Robb, *White-Collar Crime in Modern England: Financial Fraud and Business Morality, 1845-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 31-32.
[23] Robb, *White-Collar Crime*, p. 34.
[24] Robb, *White-Collar Crime*, p. 3.

literature who exemplify the crooked businessman. Clive Emsley points to Uriah Heep in Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1849-50), a snakelike, devious character who extorts money from the good Mr. Wickfield. Similarly, there is Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins' sensation novel *The Woman in White* (1859-60), who plots to claim Laura Fairlie's fortune by faking her death.[25] Shore similarly points to some contemporary press reports which expose she what calls 'a hidden financial criminal underworld, straddling a line between the criminal class and the respectable class'.[26] For the most part, however, members of the supposedly respectable upper and middle classes who turned to crime were just viewed by contemporaries as 'bad apples' that had been led astray or placed in tempting situations.[27]

Conclusion

Reynolds' depiction of criminality amongst members of respectable society is more nuanced than Dickens or Collins: according to Reynolds there is a criminal upper class, and a criminal lower class; the underworld mirrors the upper world. Sometimes members from both spheres collaborate to cause harm to members of 'the industrious classes'. The M.P., Eugene Markham, is not merely a 'bad apple' who has been led astray. Instead, he actively pursues a 'white collar' criminal course of life. Portraying the upper world of crime, of course, suited Reynolds' radical sentiments: as we have seen, he detested the political establishment and ensured that in *The Mysteries of London* its members were implicated in criminal acts, even if their complicity is limited to merely purchasing smuggled goods.[28] If a majority of the poor are indeed criminal, it is because their upper-class counterparts facilitate or indeed, as we saw with the exchange between Eugene and the Cracksman, take a leading role in directing such crime.

[25] Emsley, *Crime and Society*, p. 58.
[26] Shore, *London's Criminal Underworlds*, p. 3.
[27] Emsley, *Crime and Society*, p. 58.
[28] Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* Vol. 1, p. 191.